

The Civil Rights Movement: 1919-1960s

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Overview

When most Americans think of the Civil Rights Movement, they have in mind a span of time beginning with the 1954 Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregated education, or the Montgomery Bus Boycott and culminated in the late 1960s or early 1970s. The movement encompassed both ad hoc local groups and established organizations like the



Sit-in at lunch counter,
Jackson, MS, 1963.



Sit-down strike,
Greensboro, NC, 1960.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) (SNCC). Despite the fact that they were not always united around strategy and tactics and drew members from different classes and backgrounds, the movement nevertheless cohered around the aim of eliminating the system of Jim Crow segregation and the reform of some of the worst aspects of racism in American institutions and life.

Much of our memory of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is

embodied in dramatic photographs, newsreels, and recorded speeches, which America encountered in daily papers and the nightly news. As the movement rolled across the nation, Americans absorbed images of hopeful, disciplined, and dedicated young people shaping their destinies. They were met with hostility,

federal ambivalence and indifference, as well as mob and police violence. African Americans fought back with direct action protests and keen political organizing, such as voter registration drives and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The crowning achievements were the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). The images are alternately angering and inspiring, powerful, iconic even. However, by themselves they cannot tell the history of the Civil Rights Movement. They need to be contextualized.

The drama of the mid-twentieth century emerged on a foundation of earlier struggles. Two are particularly notable: the NAACP's campaign against lynching, and the NAACP's legal campaign against segregated education, which culminated in the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision.

The [NAACP's anti-lynching campaign](#) of the 1930s combined widespread publicity about the causes and costs of lynching, a successful drive to defeat Supreme Court nominee John J. Parker for his white supremacist and anti-union views and then defeat senators who voted for confirmation, and a skillful effort to lobby Congress and



Students of Central High School in
Little Rock, AR, 1957.



"Freedom Riders,"
Anniston, AL, 1961.

the Roosevelt administration to pass a federal anti-lynching law. Southern senators filibustered, but they could not prevent the formation of a national consensus against lynching; by 1938 the number of lynchings declined steeply. Other organizations, such as the left-wing National Negro Congress, fought lynching, too, but the NAACP emerged from the campaign as the most influential civil rights organization in national politics and maintained that position through the mid-1950s.



Charles Hamilton Houston

The campaign for desegregated education was part of a larger struggle to reshape the contours of America—in terms of race, but also in the ways political and economic power is exercised in this country. Plans for the legal campaign that culminated with *Brown* were sketched in 1929 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Charles Hamilton Houston, the black attorney most responsible for developing the legal theory underpinning *Brown*, focused on segregated education because he believed that it was the concentrated expression of all the inequalities blacks endured.

Houston was unabashed: lawyers were either social engineers or they were parasites. He desired equal access to education, but he also was concerned with the type of society blacks were trying to integrate. He was among those who surveyed American society and saw racial inequality *and* the ruling powers that promoted racism to divide black workers from white workers. Because he believed that racial violence in Depression-era America was so pervasive as to make mass direct action untenable, he emphasized the redress of grievances through the courts.

The designers of the *Brown* strategy developed a potent combination of gradualism in legal matters and advocacy of far-reaching change in other political arenas. Through the 1930s and much of the 1940s, the NAACP initiated suits that dismantled aspects of the edifice of segregated education, each building on the precedent of the previous one. Not until the late 1940s did the NAACP believe it politically feasible to challenge directly the constitutionality of “separate but equal” education itself. Concurrently, civil rights organizations backed efforts to radically alter the balance of power between employers and workers in the United States. They paid special attention to forming an alliance with organized labor, whose history of racial exclusion angered blacks. In the 1930s, the National Negro Congress brought blacks into the newly formed United Steel Workers, and the union paid attention to the particular demands of African Americans. The NAACP assisted the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest black labor organization of its day. In the 1940s, the United Auto Workers, with NAACP encouragement, made overtures to black workers. The NAACP’s successful fight against the Democratic white primary in the South was more than a bid for inclusion; it was a stiff challenge to what was in fact a regional one-party dictatorship. Recognizing the interdependence of domestic and foreign affairs, the NAACP’s program in the 1920s and 1930s promoted solidarity with Haitians who were trying to end the American military occupation and with colonized blacks elsewhere in the Caribbean and in Africa. African Americans’ support for WWII and the

battle against the Master Race ideology abroad was matched by equal determination to eradicate it in America, too. In the post-war years blacks supported the decolonization of Africa and Asia.

Gradualism was a smart legal strategy, but Charles Houston also knew that it was a mistake to trim political demands to suit the nation's leaders' ideas of propriety. He supported [Henry Wallace](#)'s Progressive Party presidential bid in 1948. Wallace called racism the nation's and the South's "number one enemy." He promised to defuse the Cold War, promote working class political participation, and limit the influence of corporations in American civil life. Houston saw school desegregation not as an end in itself, not to promote some amorphous "inclusion," but as a major way to revolutionize American society.



Henry A. Wallace

The Cold War and McCarthyism put a hold on such expansive conceptions of civil/human rights. Critics of our domestic and foreign policies who exceeded narrowly defined boundaries were labeled un-American and thus sequestered from Americans' consciousness. In a supreme irony, the Supreme Court rendered the *Brown* decision and then the government suppressed the very critique of American society that animated many of *Brown*'s architects.

White southern resistance to *Brown* was formidable and the slow pace of change stimulated impatience especially among younger African Americans as the 1960s began. They concluded that they could not wait for change—they had to make it. And the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#), which lasted the entire year of 1956, had demonstrated that mass direct action could indeed work. The four college students from Greensboro who sat at the Woolworth lunch counter set off a decade of activity and organizing that would kill Jim Crow.

Elimination of segregation in public accommodations and the removal of "Whites Only" and "Colored Only" signs was no mean feat. Yet from the very first sit-in, [Ella Baker](#), the grassroots leader whose activism dated from the 1930s and who was advisor to the students who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), pointed out that the struggle was "concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke." Far more was at stake for these activists than changing the hearts of whites. When the sit-ins swept Atlanta in 1960, protesters' demands included jobs, health care, reform of the police and criminal justice system, education, and the vote. (See: ["An Appeal for Human Rights."](#)) Demonstrations in Birmingham in 1963 under the leadership of Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which was affiliated with the SCLC, demanded not only an end to segregation in downtown stores but also jobs for African Americans in those businesses and municipal government. The 1963 March on Washington, most often remembered as the event at which Dr. King proclaimed his dream, was a demonstration for "Jobs and Justice."

Movement activists from SNCC and CORE asked sharp questions about the exclusive nature of American democracy and advocated solutions to the [disfranchisement](#) and violation of the human rights of African Americans, including Dr. King's nonviolent populism, Robert Williams' "armed self-reliance," and Malcolm X's incisive critiques of worldwide white supremacy, among others. (See: Dr. King, ["Where Do We Go from Here?"](#); Robert F. Williams, ["Negroes with Guns"](#); and Malcolm X, ["Not just an American problem, but a world problem."](#)) What they proposed was breathtakingly radical, especially in light of today's political discourse and the simplistic ways it prefers to remember the freedom struggle. King called for a guaranteed annual income, redistribution of the national wealth to meet human needs, and an end to a war to colonize the Vietnamese. Malcolm X proposed to internationalize the black American freedom struggle and to link it with liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Thus the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was not concerned exclusively with interracial cooperation or segregation and discrimination as a character issue. Rather, as in earlier decades, the prize was a redefinition of American society and a redistribution of social and economic power.

Guiding Student Discussion

Students discussing the Civil Rights Movement will often direct their attention to individuals' motives. For example, they will question whether President Kennedy sincerely believed in racial equality when he supported civil rights or only did so out of political expediency. Or they may ask how whites could be so cruel as to attack peaceful and dignified demonstrators. They may also express awe at Martin Luther King's forbearance and calls for integration while showing discomfort with Black Power's separatism and proclamations of self-defense. But a focus on the character and moral fiber of leading individuals overlooks the movement's attempts to change the ways in which political, social, and economic power are exercised. Leading productive discussions that consider broader issues will likely have to involve debunking some conventional wisdom about the Civil Rights Movement. Guiding students to discuss the extent to which nonviolence and racial integration were considered within the movement to be hallowed goals can lead them to greater insights.

Nonviolence and passive resistance were prominent *tactics* of protesters and organizations. (See: [SNCC Statement of Purpose](#) and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson's memoir, [The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It](#).) But they were not the only ones, and the number of protesters who were *ideologically* committed to them was relatively small. Although the name of one of the important civil rights organizations was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, its members soon concluded that advocating nonviolence as a principle was irrelevant to most African Americans they were trying to reach. Movement participants in Mississippi, for example, did not decide beforehand to engage in violence, but self-defense was simply considered common sense. If some SNCC members in Mississippi were convinced pacifists in the face of escalating violence, they nevertheless enjoyed the protection of local people who shared their goals but were not yet ready to beat their swords into ploughshares.

Armed self-defense had been an essential component of the black freedom struggle, and it was not confined to the fringe. Returning soldiers fought back against white mobs during the Red Summer of 1919. In 1946, World War Two veterans likewise protected black communities in places like Columbia, Tennessee, the site of a bloody race riot. Their self-defense undoubtedly brought national attention to the oppressive conditions of African Americans; the NAACP's nationwide campaign prompted President Truman to appoint a civil rights commission that produced *To Secure These Rights*, a landmark report that called for the elimination of segregation. Army veteran Robert F. Williams, who was a proponent of what he called "armed self-reliance," headed a thriving branch of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, in the early 1950s. The poet [Claude McKay's "If We Must Die"](#) dramatically captures the spirit of self-defense and violence.

Often, deciding whether violence is "good" or "bad," necessary or ill-conceived depends on one's perspective and which point of view runs through history books. Students should be encouraged to consider why activists may have considered violence a necessary part of their work and what role it played in their overall programs. Are violence and nonviolence necessarily antithetical, or can they be complementary? For example the Black Panther Party may be best remembered by images of members clad in leather and carrying rifles, but they also challenged widespread police brutality, advocated reform of the criminal justice system, and established community survival programs, including medical clinics, schools, and their signature breakfast program. One question that can lead to an extended discussion is to ask students what the difference is between people who rioted in the 1960s and advocated violence and the participants in the Boston Tea Party at the outset of the American Revolution. Both groups wanted out from oppression, both saw that violence could be efficacious, and both were excoriated by the rulers of their day. Teachers and students can then explore reasons why those Boston hooligans are celebrated in American history and whether the same standards should be applied to those who used arms in the 1960s.

An important goal of the Civil Rights Movement was the elimination of segregation. But if students, who are now a generation or more removed from Jim Crow, are asked to define segregation, they are likely to point out examples of individual racial separation such as blacks and whites eating at different cafeteria tables and the existence of black and white houses of worship. Like most of our political leaders and public opinion, they place King's injunction to judge people by the content of their character and not the color of their skin exclusively in the context of personal relationships and interactions. Yet segregation was a social, political, and economic system that placed African Americans in an inferior position, disfranchised them, and was enforced by custom, law, and official and vigilante violence.

The discussion of segregation should be expanded beyond expressions of personal preferences. One way to do this is to distinguish between black and white students hanging out in different parts of a school and a law mandating racially separate schools, or between black and white students eating separately and a laws or customs excluding African Americans from restaurants and other public facilities. Put another way, the civil rights movement was not fought merely to ensure that students of different backgrounds could become acquainted with each other. The goal of an integrated and multicultural America is not achieved simply by proximity. Schools, the economy, and other social institutions needed to be reformed to meet the needs for all. This was

the larger and widely understood meaning of the goal of ending Jim Crow, and it is argued forcefully by James Farmer in [“Integration or Desegregation.”](#)

A guided discussion should point out that many of the approaches to ending segregation did not embrace integration or assimilation, and students should become aware of the appeal of separatism. W. E. B. Du Bois believed in what is today called multiculturalism. But by the mid-1930s he concluded that the Great Depression, virulent racism, and the unreliability of white progressive reformers who had previously expressed sympathy for civil rights rendered an integrated America a distant dream. In an important article, [“Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?”](#) Du Bois argued for the strengthening of black pride and the fortification of separate black schools and other important institutions. Black communities across the country were in severe distress; it was counterproductive, he argued, to sacrifice black schoolchildren at the altar of integration and to get them into previously all-white schools, where they would be shunned and worse. It was far better to invest in strengthening black-controlled education to meet black communities’ needs. If, in the future, integration became a possibility, African Americans would be positioned to enter that new arrangement on equal terms. Du Bois’ argument found echoes in the 1960s writing of Stokely Carmichael ([“Toward Black Liberation”](#)) and Malcolm X ([“The Ballot or the Bullet”](#)).

Scholars Debate

Any brief discussion of historical literature on the Civil Rights Movement is bound to be incomplete. The books offered—a biography, a study of the black freedom struggle in Memphis, a brief study of the *Brown* decision, and a debate over the unfolding of the movement—were selected for their accessibility variety, and usefulness to teaching, as well as the soundness of their scholarship.

Walter White: Mr. NAACP, by Kenneth Robert Janken, is a biography of one of the most well known civil rights figure of the first half of the twentieth century. White made a name for himself as the NAACP’s risk-taking investigator of lynchings, riots, and other racial violence in the years after World War I. He was a formidable persuader and was influential in the halls of power, counting Eleanor Roosevelt, senators, representatives, cabinet secretaries, Supreme Court justices, union leaders, Hollywood moguls, and diplomats among his circle of friends. His style of work depended upon rallying enlightened elites, and he favored a placing effort into developing a civil rights bureaucracy over local and mass-oriented organizations. Walter White was an expert in the practice of “brokerage politics”: During decades when the majority of African Americans were legally disfranchised, White led the organization that gave them an effective voice, representing them and interpreting their demands and desires (as he understood them) to those in power. Two examples of this were highlighted in the first part of this essay: the anti-lynching crusade, and the lobbying of President Truman, which resulted in *To Secure These Rights*. A third example is his essential role in producing Marian Anderson’s iconic 1939 Easter Sunday concert at the Lincoln Memorial, which drew the avid support of President Roosevelt and members of his administration, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. His style of leadership

was, before the emergence of direct mass action in the years after White's death in 1955, the dominant one in the Civil Rights Movement.

There are many excellent books that study the development of the Civil Rights Movement in one locality or state. An excellent addition to the collection of local studies is *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, by Laurie B. Green, which focuses on Memphis and the surrounding rural areas of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi between the late 1930s and 1968, when Martin Luther King was assassinated there. Like the best of the local studies, this book presents an expanded definition of civil rights that encompasses not only desegregation of public facilities and the attainment of legal rights but also economic and political equality. Central to this were efforts by African Americans to define themselves and shake off the cultural impositions and mores of Jim Crow. During WWII, unionized black men went on strike in the defense industry to upgrade their job classifications. Part of their grievances revolved around wages and working conditions, but black workers took issue, too, with employers' and the government's reasoning that only low status jobs were open to blacks because they were less intelligent and capable. In 1955, six black female employees at a white-owned restaurant objected to the owner's new method of attracting customers as degrading and redolent of the plantation: placing one of them outside dressed as a mammy doll to ring a dinner bell. When the workers tried to walk off the job, the owner had them arrested, which gave rise to local protest. In 1960, black Memphis activists helped support black sharecroppers in surrounding counties who were evicted from their homes when they initiated voter registration drives. The 1968 sanitation workers strike mushroomed into a mass community protest both because of wage issues *and* the strikers' determination to break the perception of their being dependent, epitomized in their slogan "I *Am* a Man." This book also shows that not everyone was able to cast off the plantation mentality, as black workers and energetic students at LeMoyne College confronted established black leaders whose positions and status depended on white elites' sufferance.

Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents, edited by Waldo E. Martin, Jr., contains an insightful 40-page essay that places both the NAACP's legal strategy and 1954 *Brown* decision in multiple contexts, including alternate approaches to incorporating African American citizens into the American nation, and the impact of World War II and the Cold War on the road to *Brown*. The accompanying documents affirm the longstanding black freedom struggle, including demands for integrated schools in Boston in 1849, continuing with protests against the separate but equal ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896, and important items from the NAACP's cases leading up to *Brown*. The documents are prefaced by detailed head notes and provocative discussion questions.

Debating the Civil Rights Movement, by Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, is likewise focused on instruction and discussion. This essay has largely focused on the development of the Civil Rights Movement from the standpoint of African American resistance to segregation and the formation organizations to fight for racial, economic, social, and political equality. One area it does not explore is how the federal government helped to shape the movement. Steven Lawson traces the federal response to African Americans' demands for civil rights and concludes that it was legislation, judicial decisions, and executive actions between 1945 and 1968 that was most responsible for the nation's advance toward racial equality. Charles Payne vigorously disagrees, focusing instead on the protracted grassroots organizing as the motive force for whatever

incomplete change occurred during those years. Each essay runs about forty pages, followed by smart selections of documents that support their cases.